

AUGUSTUS JOHN

PLATE I—THE SMILING WOMAN (Tate Gallery)

One of the principal works of the painter's early achievement, this picture marks a departure not only from the Academic tradition prevailing at the beginning of the century, but also from the form of impressionism which had been largely adopted by the younger English school. One must go back to the old masters to seek a kinship for so imposing a treatment of the figure, though there is no trace of archaism in the sense of movement and the psychological expressiveness which it conveys. The design is conceived on clear, bold lines with no inactive space, each fold of drapery bringing its contribution of pictorial eloquence. By its combination of dignity and subtlety, welded in an unmistakably individual style, "The Smiling Woman" brought into contemporary painting an unaccustomed grandness of manner illuminated by living emotion.



THE SMILING WOMAN

Augustus John

BY T. W. EARP ■ ■ ■
ILLUSTRATED WITH SIX
REPRODUCTIONS IN COLOUR



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AUGUSTUS JOHN

I

IN 1898 the prize for composition at the Slade School of Art in the University of London was won by "Moses and the Brazen Serpent," the work of Augustus Edwin John, then aged nineteen. and born at Tenby,

sion of individuality which is the key to the artist's invention and the channel of his communication. In some cases, as with Ingres and Burne-Jones, the essential draughtsman is not equally successful when he comes to applying paint. At the present time there is a tendency to cultivate drawing less, both for its own sake and its share in the painted picture. This is a reaction against the fashion which prevailed during the greater part of last century, when it was given too great a prominence as one of the pictorial elements, at the expense of the others. Unity was frequently lost in a confusion of line. But to neglect the importance of drawing is only to run to another extreme, denying its inherent quality and refusing its particular delight. With John it is both an invaluable contribution to painting and of considerable account as an independent branch of his work.

In his studies of the figure and pencil portraits, from the Slade onwards, the line is a wonderful instrument. Firm and supple, it is never very broad, but when at its most tenuous it still bears triumphantly the allotted pressure of volume, as the delicate arches of Gothic architecture support their imposed

mass. Each detail is controlled and sensitive ; there is nothing superfluous, no ornamentation to divert from the result as a whole. The shading is economic, and never used, as some draughtsmen employ it, for a means of escape from a difficulty. The curves are free, with the easy sweep of a signature, yet ruled by a general logic. For John makes in his vision his representational selection from appearance, and the line is its instant symbol. He does not make the selection afterwards, upon the line, by cumulative emphasis. The finished drawing is thus a first instead of a consequent process. But the preliminary stage of vision has been so strenuously pursued that the line, for all its candour, is decisive. It is academic, in the best sense of the word, and it is alive.

The figures rise in the surrounding space with a fine poise and dignity. Many of them are female nudes, of a noble grace of carriage, palpitating with a well-organized sense of physical being when in repose, or arrested in the swirl of motion with complete unity of gesture. Others, with the calm folds of drapery flowing about them, are undisturbed by action, yet still dynamic in their quiescence. In every case there is concentration on the

Whistler meant it to go, but there has been an effort to extend it too far. It was a useful protest in a period when the public almost refused to look at a picture unless it might be considered as an illustration to a book, when positively bad pictures were praised because of the appeal of their subject. There was, at that time, a serious possibility that the old man in the snow, by having the name of a Dickens character attached to him, would pass muster, even though ill-drawn and ill-painted.

But Whistler's apt criticism that the title does not make the picture has been expanded into an implication that it spoils it. An exaggerated æsthetic Puritanism would fain denude art of any smirch of literary association ; reaction from one extreme has once more led to another. Many artists have recently devoted themselves to the exploration of technical problems, and have been occupied with form for form's sake only. To this the other pictorial elements are sacrificed, and the result is the production of landscapes, nudes, and still-lives which are frequently monotonous. The variety in form offered by figure compositions is eschewed, to the encouragement of

slipshod draughtsmanship, because with the placing of forms in relation to each other or to landscape there is the danger of literature creeping in. A barren absolute is hoped for from this dervish-like revolving of form upon itself, but the resources of art and art's vital purpose as a medium of expression and communication are sadly restricted by it. A picture is none the worse for being an illustration, although being an illustration may not make it any better. But, once it has achieved a merit of form, the greater the weight of ideas it carries, the more associations it conveys, the more it benefits. Its own quality of life is increased by the significance of external life which it contains ; its science is quickened with emotion. To follow form for form's sake, and to deny form for life's sake, is to refuse the whole for the part. It would lead to making dangerous distinctions in the great art of the past, to depriving us of capabilities for pleasure both there and in the present. A picture can live up to its title as well as live down to it, and though the subject does not add to its purely pictorial excellence, it certainly adds to its interest.

The literature of John's work is always

kept subordinate to his art, but in some of the paintings and most of the composition studies it invests the craftsmanship with a delightful phantasy or sharpens it with dramatic tension. In his student days he avoided the tyranny of the subject which then dominated the Academy. The prevalent costume piece, often cheaply sensational or sentimental, and the empty attitudes of diluted Victorian-Hellenic held no attraction for him. He avoided them as he avoided the arid mechanism in paint of a later vogue. Whistler was the contemporary hero of any adventurous student, and John's professors, Tonks and Brown, were in advance of the banal mediocrity of the day. With a youthful enthusiasm for epic and legend, he was naturally receptive to these influences in revolt against the novelettish tendency in art. There is nothing trivial or weakly pretty about the early compositions ; the imagination which illuminates them has the strength and freshness characteristic of the bardic poetry of his native Wales.

The unity of pose which marked the single figures is merged in the composition drawings into a unity of pattern. The firm, slender line is retained and used with the same economy.

wash studies upon which John also started while at the Slade, warmth of feeling and exuberance are given the freest play. The bold, vigorous strokes combine in a daring sweep, of which the recklessness is hardly tempered. An unerring instinct gives them liberty as they move across the sheet in intricate arabesque or decisively mark one swift note of rhythm. For behind the gracious figures and the landscape setting there is an architecture of design which, were it reduced to an abstraction, would still be logically constructed and compelling as pure pattern.

But the skeleton of design is admirably fleshed. In the gradations of ink and sepia there is a vividness of light and shade, an openness of distance, and a precise indication of scene. The figures are romantic creations, gathered abundantly from past and present. Yet their strange neighbouring convinces; they are not properties or lay figures, but living symbols of the emotion which has set them to action, moving in a world completely realized in the artist's imagination.

One of the wash drawings completed while John was still at the Slade, "Walpurgis Night," is now in the Tate Gallery. It is a typical

example of this branch of his work. Cloud, mountain peak, and the personages of the spectacle are woven together in a clearly-defined circular rhythm, indicated by the flight of witches rising in a curve above their companions and the watchers at the Sabbath. This assembly is enlivened with a variety of incident ; each figure gives its individual share of interest, and the drawing is crowded with action, but all is grasped into cohesion by the dominating current of the design. When John left the Slade, which he did in his prize-winning year, he was already a master in those aspects of his art which had so far attracted his effort.

II

In the " Walpurgis Night " drawing, as in the others executed at the same period, there is evidence of John's intense study of the great works of the past. The practice of the Slade was fortified by many hours of meditation at the National Gallery, an indispensable yet a dangerous part of a young artist's training. It was a time when there was no strongly-pronounced stream of native tradition

to bear him easily along in its flow. The Academy was sunk in a moribund conservatism, given over to the last puerilities of the subject picture, whose reign had lasted for nearly a century. A visit to the Diploma Gallery at Burlington House, one of the most interesting yet rarely-visited museums in London, is indispensable to any student of the history of æsthetics investigating the history of that popular genre.

Menander and Posidippus, the henchmen of the Comic Muse, sit enthroned with their brazen brows puckered in the entrance-hall of the Royal Academy. Their presence is a more humorous invention than any of their own. Throughout the year occasional Continentals or Americans proceed past them upstairs to the Diploma Gallery; for they know that the permanent Academy there housed is altogether as interesting as the annual one. The latter contains the picture of the year; the others, the pictures of a century.

It contains, too, a few pictures of all time. There are over a dozen small Constables of heath and sea, and some of hardly anything but sky, which are among the loveliest things he ever painted, and outshine the larger land-

scape by him in the room. There is a romantic Welsh castle of Turner, a hilly Gainsborough, a Raeburn boy, a Lawrence girl, a Leonardo cartoon, a Michaelangelo cartoon, and the unfinished Michaelangelo statue of the Virgin, the Child, and St. John. These are treasures enough, and for curiosity there is the chair of Sir Joshua Reynolds's sitters, of which we are informed by an inscription, "The loveliest and most intellectual women of the time have sat in it. The majestic Siddons leaned her arm upon it as the Tragic Muse; Kitty Fisher lounged in it as Cleopatra."

What more could be asked? Yet more is given; for the bulk of the gallery consists of paintings presented by Royal Academicians on their assumption of office. It is a remarkable collection, and the large Lawrence, on the stairs, of "Satan assembling his Legions," should not be taken in too symbolic a sense with regard to it. It is true that most of the canvases are bad, but the passage of years has cast an adumbration of sentiment over them. They are as odd and pathetic now as an old brooch or fashion-plate. Possibly they caused much gnashing of teeth among the young advance-guard of the day, but the advance-

guard probably became Academicians themselves in the course of time, and neither blushed nor winked as they presented their own works :

“ Ils embrassaient violemment
Les intérêts de leur chimère.”

It is the phases of the subject picture that we follow on the walls. Mythology leads off strongly with Flaxman's drawings for Homer, Smirke's "Slaughter of the Followers of Penelope," Hilton's "Ganymede," and somebody else's "Discovery of Ulysses by his Nurse." Then, despite the Luddite machine-wreckers and the distress following the Napoleonic wars, and the great increase of transportations from the county assizes, comes a long series of pictures of rural delights. Wilkie started the vogue, and although art became realistic it remained splendidly regardless of actuality. Rustics laughing, rat-catching, wood-gathering, fortune-telling—rustics enjoying themselves in every possible way—brought to the Academy the illusion of Merrie England just after England had ceased to be merry.

But the psychological theme was beginning

to intrude. Redgrave's "Outcast," painted in the 'Forties, was the thin edge of the wedge. The daughter clasping the unwelcome child is shown the cottage door by the stern father, while the onlookers assume expressions of horror, despair, and I-told-you-so. Few subjects have had so healthy a life, and Redgrave's outcast must by now be the mother of hundreds. Unwin's "Italian Mother" is a poor thing in comparison. Yet the dramatic situation is a poignant one, for, while the infant lies dead within, there come to the ears of the distracted mother the strains of the serenader without. Moving as these appeals to the emotions are, they were refined upon, however, by the intellectual exercise of the problem picture. The earliest example in the Diploma Gallery shows a stout, bearded gentleman of the fifteenth century crossing a drawbridge; he holds a sword, and is followed by a girl carrying a casket. Their faces are unshadowed by any particular emotion, and the work is entitled "Whither?"—Whither, indeed?

Academic psychology was beginning to widen, as at the same time were academic history and geography. There was an outburst of exoticism, of Nubian slaves and

The great majority of these canvases are negligible, from the point of view of painting. Their drawing, colour, and *matière* are coarse and flamboyant, as their intellectual content is empty. Not inappropriately, the visitor in the farthest room finds himself facing an enormous Watts, which, owing to vagaries of lighting, serves him as a mirror, and beneath his reflected image he reads the title, "My Punishment is Greater than I can Bear."

A young artist of the 'Nineties could discover little inspiration from such academicism, unless his talent was of a conscious and willing mediocrity. Even as the stronghold of conventional portraiture, the institution's reputation was crumbling. Its finest artist, Watts, had become preoccupied with facile allegory, his early glow and concentration dissipated in large sprawling figures and coarse colouring. And pre-Raphaelitism, which had been the most forceful revolt against devitalized official art, had lost the purity of its first impulse.

The brilliant adolescence of this school had failed its promise. The most important of its representatives, Rossetti, had succumbed to a flaccid distortion, a languid, garish voluptuousness which exhibited most of the features

against which he had once rebelled. Millais became a lost leader, in Browning's sense of the term, a repentant conformist to the Academy he had hoped to reform. And while Burne-Jones had adopted a feeble and bloodless convention, Holman Hunt and Madox Brown, still faithful to their early principles, but clinging to them desperately for lack of a real selective sense, had allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by mass of detail and crudity of colour-realism. The beginning of pre-Raphaelitism is one of the most inspiring events in the history of English art; its end one of the most tragic, and by the late 'Nineties the results of the movement were less an example to follow than a warning.

The healthiest influence was the Gallic-American Whistler, who had made England at once the country of his election and his battle-ground. He brought with him from France a biting scorn for official art, and the revelation of Impressionism and the work of the Japanese. His own painting was so personal that for any one else to try to adapt it for his use could only lead to imitation, to the production of inferior Whistlers. But the



between a thought and a thing . . . the union and reconciliation of that which is nature and that which is exclusively human. It is the figured language of thought." Thus, like other languages, it is best learned by contact with its native speakers, not only from grammars and professors, and for John the National Gallery was the natural complement to the Slade.

It is not difficult to detect reminiscences of these visits in his early work, but the game of spotting influences is one that can easily be pursued with too great seriousness. Something of the remote air and etiolated forms of Botticelli may be discerned in the line drawings of John's figures, something of the physical abundance of Rubens's models in the nudes of the wash drawings—such as "Walpurgis Night." But most renderings of the female form can be shared between Botticelli and Rubens, and it would be difficult to find any artist of whom this aspect of his work possessed no affinity with one or other of those two masters.

In the same way, the figure of Faust in the "Walpurgis Night" has a grace of poise which, to some extent, echoes Watteau, but so do

most figures which are marked by distinction of bearing. Watteau is an encyclopædia of elegant gesture, to whom most formal poses may be referred back, just as a painted smile is almost invariably Leonardesque. Such generalized influence is not very much different from that of common accent in human speech. The development of art is the collecting-up of former tradition and the projection of the newcomer's individuality a step beyond, like the successive accretions which go to the formation of a coral reef. John's independence survived envelopment by his predecessors ; he gathered the lore of the past, but remoulded it into something new, and stamped it with his own personality. But occasionally he deliberately gives an indication, like a greeting on the way, of a spiritual sympathy with another artist of the past.

Later, in a consideration of the etchings, we shall find the actual technical influence of Rembrandt, while in certain of the paintings emphasis is laid upon avowed adaptation, as a musician may entitle his work a variation upon another's theme. But while we may say that the whole of the art which preceded it has influenced the work of John, in the sense

that he has continued a universal tradition, the remarkable aspect of his formative years is the absence of pronounced particular influence. When most young artists would be turning out pictures to which one might put earlier masters' names, he had already begun to produce unmistakable "Johns."

III

Whatever experiments he may have made in private, several years were still to pass before the brilliant draughtsman was revealed to the public as a painter. In 1899 he exhibited some drawings with the New English Art Club, and for some time sent only examples of that part of his work to the institution's shows. They were then held in the Dudley Gallery, attached to the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly. After the demolition of that building they took place in various galleries, but are now established in permanence in Burlington Gardens, where John is still a frequent contributor.

In the 'Nineties the New English Art Club represented the left wing of contemporary

English painting. It stood for experiment and adventure against an academic convention which had ceased to possess any living significance. Like all revolutionary bodies after they have attained their aim, it was itself to become conventionalized later, and settle down to a staid, unexciting respectability. But its early days were an important and courageous episode in the history of English art. Most of the members were adherents to Whistler, either actual imitators of his painting, or those who found in his pugnacity a vocable expression of their own discontent with the official authority. Sickert, Steer, and Conder, and John's contemporaries at the Slade, Orpen and Rothenstein, were among the most prominent of its members during the first years of its existence.

The foundation of the Club, at a time when a young painter's opportunities for exhibiting his work were much rarer than they are to-day, was the first serious attack upon the Academy's prestige. It could no longer implicitly force youthful talent into conformity with its doctrines by the menace of a rejection, which greatly diminished the artist's chances of reaching the public view. The New English

Art Club has at any rate justified its creation by providing opportunities for exhibition for the best of the country's painters at the time.

John's drawings, and the finely-modelled heads in chalk and sanguine with which he heralded his approach to colour and portraiture, showed something beyond promise, and rapidly attracted attention. In 1901 he received a temporary appointment as a teacher of art at the University of Liverpool. He remained in residence there for a year, a period of very great activity, during which he laid the foundation of his achievement as a portrait painter, and started to experiment in etching. In 1902 his "Merekli" was "the picture of the year" at the New English Art Club.

This portrait of a seated, dark-haired woman, holding in one hand a basket of fruit and in the other a flower, is full of exquisite passages... It is literally expressive to the finger-tips, for the hands are admirably painted. The expression is one of repose, hardly broken by the subtlety of the smile. The right side of the picture is in shadow; but the moulding of the neck, fully disclosed by the low blouse, is boldly confronted and triumphantly overcome. The basket of fruit and the flowers in

hand and lap are themselves an impressive piece of still-life, relieving, while completely in harmony with, the composure and gentle dignity of the whole canvas. "Merekli," which now forms part of the Rutherford Collection, bequeathed to Manchester, made it clear that in John not only the draughtsman but a portrait painter of remarkable power was to be taken into account.

He had painted also during the year several of the prominent citizens of Liverpool, and on his return to London continued busily the new development of his work along with a good deal of etching. In 1904 the portrait "Dorelia" appeared at the New English Art Club, and confirmed the high opinions which had been won by "Merekli." In this year he held his first one-man show at the Carfax Gallery.

He had rushed neither into oil painting nor into exhibition, but the years of preparation had been rewarded with success, and there is little doubt that if he had not shown considerable strength of character he might have been drawn into the rôle of a fashionable portrait painter at the outset of his career. This mixed blessing always awaits an English artist whose

PLATE III —SUGGIA

(Tate Gallery)

The freedom and spontaneity of this portrait of the celebrated musician give the impression of its having been carried through on the crest of a triumphant *coup d'essai*. Its composition at first sight seems fortuitous: so admirable is its balance and so natural the action displayed. But soon one realizes the amount of carefully meditated organization necessary to achieve so effortless a result: to make the bulk of the instrument gracefully subservient to the general pattern and to merge the player's robe into the grave harmony of colour. The poise of the head and the fine sweep of the arm are testimonies to the painter's instinct for graceful motion and play their part in gathering up the whole portrait to its single purpose of dynamic representation.



SUGGIA

traditions. He soon became a fluent speaker of Romany, received as a fellow-countryman in the gipsy tents, and discovering in his own nature the warmest sympathy with his hosts. He continued the contact with them on his caravan journeys, and some of his finest work is a record of his meetings with a tribe of this ancient wandering people, of whom a large number still successfully evade the tentacles of modern urbanism.

On many canvases he has fixed the types of this splendid and obstinate survival. The dark eyes, the glossy black hair and majestic poise, made the gipsy women more impressive models than fashionable ladies of the town. He has painted them in France and the remote parts of Spain, as well as in England and Wales and Ireland, since he could not pass their tents without pausing, and to stay meant the awakening of the artist's urge to paint or draw as well as the pleasures of fellowship. For the gipsies called forth a response that was more than an objective recognition of their qualities of form and colour, and more than a scholar's interest. The understanding was deep and more intimate, rooted in a love of freedom and wild

nature which he shared with them. It is not too much to say that they and he think alike on many of the more important problems of existence, or at least that they would agree in not regarding as important problems many matters by which narrower visions are sadly exercised.

In the swift actuality of his pictures of gipsy life and character there enters something of the spirit of the race itself. The brush is quickened to impetuosity by the subject, a glitter is lent to the suavity of colour. A nervous tensy ripples in the lithe, stalwart forms, telling of a wild impulse in reserve behind the bulwark of muscle and flesh. The sunlight plays upon them only to reveal them half possessed by secrecy, enigmatic in attitude and glance. In the night, in the glow of the camp-fire or under the stars, they become simpler, opening to the mystery of darkness, and falling into a more relaxed pose. Their defence is laid aside when the defence of the house-dwellers begins, their wealth is wrapped in rags, and when they seem most innocent they are fullest of guile. John's work presents them in all their moods, for with Leland, Borrow, and Sampson he is among the few



SIR HERBERT BARKER

not one of those painters who refuse joy for themselves as much as for others, who damp the spectator's spirits incidentally while accomplishing the greater duty of damping their own. In the same way their social prototype refuses meat and wine in such a manner as to destroy his neighbour's appetite, but without any additional glow of spiritual pride; his own empty stomach is a feast in itself. The high seriousness in the construction of John's painting is not for the purpose of conducting low spirits. The bare bones of the design form the skeleton of the picture, but he does not produce the skeleton at the feast; by then it has become something radiant and alive.

He refuses to consider that the material before him is less appropriate for a picture because it happens to be picturesque. That the choice of an ugly subject is a short cut to the creation of beauty, or that a back garden or a kitchen garden necessarily makes a better subject than a front garden, is but one more example of reaction pushed to the opposite absurdity. The Reverend William Gilpin, the apostle of the picturesque a hundred years ago, stated, "Cows are commonly the most picturesque in the months of April and May,

when the old hair is coming off." And in lamenting that moral and picturesque ideas do not always coincide, he pointed out that, "In a moral view, the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object than the loitering peasant. But in a picturesque light, it is otherwise. The arts of industry are rejected ; and even idleness, if I may so speak, adds dignity to a character." Such a doctrine seems ridiculous nowadays, but it is not more so than the back garden theory. At any rate, pictures painted under its precepts are less likely to be dull. The fallacy in either case lies in pigeon-holing beauty.

We have shown that a picture is none the worse for being a subject picture ; similarly, a subject is none the worse for being interesting on its own account. Apart from its qualities of painting, exclusively, the spectator deprives himself of much opportunity for appreciation unless he consents to recognize John's work as the expression of a romantic imagination. The elements of strangeness and adventure in the Romany life made an instant appeal to him, and he conveyed them to the canvas directly as he saw them. A realistic rendering of appearances was sufficient to the case. But

the gipsies were not always to his hand during his travels, and he had to seek and invent to obtain the same kind of emotional satisfaction with which they had provided him. He had, in fact, to create a new picturesque.

To this we owe the extensive series of paintings of a woman against a landscape background. Sometimes she is accompanied by a child, and sometimes seated, but usually she stands erect and alone. A regal figure, who might be considered as the painter's muse or the incarnation of the scene amid which she rises, she commands the interest of the picture. The landscape-forms in the distance behind her serve as an architectural base for the design ; it is she who is its central theme and leads it to its apex. The backgrounds are sections of a mountain panorama, the folds of a valley, the sweep of uplands, or a peak rising over a tarn, always dominated by the Olympian bearing and mien of their solitary visitant ; her presence only accentuates the sense of loneliness and freedom. Her bright wind-blown draperies, and the play of light and shadow over grass and rock and water, blend like a setting of gems. The subject has no set pose, but it bears a wealth of emotional sug-

gestion, and demonstrates how alert John's vision is to seize so rich a content from the casual possibilities of nature and human gesture.

During this time he also produced his early landscapes of mountain and heath, which along with those of his friend Richard Innes were a new departure in English art. They are organized with a wonderful concentration of design, indicated by means of a rapid notation which gives them an affinity with the work of the old Chinese masters. Small in size, they contain great range of distance, their demarcations of form being obtained rather by juxtaposition of mass than by linear effect. The colours, often of a daring relationship, are remarkably luminous, but harmonized by a curious quietness and simplicity of statement. These landscapes, and the ones with the single figure, were painted in Wales, which may therefore claim to have played an important part in the development of his countryman's gifts. John continued to follow the method which distinguishes them in the landscapes which he later painted in the south of France.

In these closely-filled years he move

widely about England, Wales, and Ireland, and made trips to France, Italy, and Spain from time to time. It would be very difficult to draw up a chronological record of his journeying, of which London, Liverpool, and Swanage were the more protracted haltings in this country. He had held an exhibition at the Chenil Gallery, in Chelsea, in 1908, but it was not until the following year that he settled with more or less permanence in London.

The work of this period is well represented at the Tate Gallery, and includes also a number of strong, quick sketches in oils of members of his family. Sometimes they are simply portrait heads which show more than sufficient ability for John to have restricted himself to a successful career as a painter of children. But luckily he refused to confine himself to any one department of his many-sided accomplishment. Others of these sketches are scenes of the caravan life, such as the hanging of washing or the preparation of meals. Gay and intimate, they are executed with broad, decisive strokes, and besides being implicit with the primitiveness and charm of a care-free, nomadic existence, they afford an instructive insight into John's manner of work.

At that time, and after settling in London, he accomplished a good deal of miscellaneous portraiture, while still resisting the siren-invitation to become a professional portraitist. It is possible that after his wanderings he discovered a certain monotony, both facial and mental, among the notables and fashionables who might have been regarded as his predestined models. But he painted his family and his friends for his pleasure, and would undertake a commission for a portrait when he felt really interested in the sitter. In this work there is a sense of drama and character quite absent from the mechanical "taking of the face" with which the walls of exhibitions are crowded. He is a respecter of character, but not of persons, if by persons we mean personages. There is, indeed, a legend that some of his sitters have concealed their portraits because he has respected their character at their own expense, and a soap magnate cut off the head of John's presentment of him under the pretext that it could be thus afforded easier storage. But a portrait should be more than a pictorial composition; it should be a psychological reading as well, if it is to be anything else than a still-life or a mere wall

PLATE V.—LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURE

(Private Collection)

Painted in the course of a recent visit to Provence, this canvas is one of a long series of landscapes of wild nature which aroused attention from their earliest view. Following neither the meticulous attention to detail on the part of the pre-Raphaelites, nor the impressionists' preoccupation with atmosphere, John's treatment of landscape reveals properties of decorative charm without reducing the naturalness of the scene or weakening its wilder elements. It is work full of lyrical feeling, evidence of a deep response to the moods of nature, its swift notation heeds only what is vital in the aspect while at the same time seizing an instantaneous effect. Besides its abstract qualities of energy and rhythm, this "Landscape with Figure," while a study of a particular locality, is a synthesis of the Provençal scene.



LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURE

decoration. There may be something inexorable about the way in which John gives his own interpretation of the sitter; but this interpretation is a part of his artistic integrity, and it is not asserting too much to say that it has made him the greatest living portrait painter.

V

John made the bulk of his etchings in the first ten years of the century. His earliest plates were studies of himself, and from them he went on to the delineation of various Liverpool characters—tradespeople, old men and inhabitants of the obscurer quarters of the city. His craftsmanship at this stage was full of care and almost laborious, modelled upon Rembrandt both in method and result. But while there was imitation, it was of a different nature from pastiche, since John was using the older master in order to find the way to what he himself wished to achieve; Rembrandt was only the starting-point. And in spite of their immaturity John's efforts were free from dullness and more than exercises. There was a spirit about them, an out-of-the-

too, the figure who frequently appears in the wash drawings, 'an elderly peripatetic of the hills, partaking alike of Socrates and Sancho Panza. He is white-bearded, bowler-hatted, and clad in a travelling tailor's lustreless ready-made. Constantly he insinuates a *louche* and insidious presence in a knot of country-folk, apparently always occupied in mysterious and possibly not very reputable bargaining. He parades a bullying insistence, and hints spectacularly of confidences. Watery-eyed, with rotund paunch and an air of shabby dignity, he, too, is an admirably consistent humorous type, of epic comprehension.

"The Smiling Woman" caused the particular direction of John's vogue. It was hardly surprising that the exhibition of this magnificent painting should cause a sensation, for it is one of the landmarks of English art. In a period of feebleness and doubt it made a clear pronouncement that strength still remained with tradition. But it showed also that an artist's contact with his great predecessors must be at first hand, that such contact was something more vital than an imitation of an imitation, and, above all, that the artist of to-day has on his side got to bring a strength

of his own to it. The ordeal, for it is a test of the spirit, is to be resisted besides being welcomed. "The Smiling Woman" is not simply an absorption and re-issue of the past; it is John's triumphant expression, personal and distinct, with references to the past in order to demonstrate that his capacity is on a level with the masters, but that he has his own way of achieving even those high objects to which they exerted their endeavour; there is a challenge in its homage. The Smiling Woman's mystery is not Monna Lisa's; though each guards her secret; and though it, too, trembles on the confines of mirth, her smile is of a different kind. The robe has a purity of fold and a lucid glow of tone that one might find in the Italians, but it falls about an attitude of simultaneous invitation and withdrawal that had not been conceived before. The superficiais are adaptations that offer their especial pleasure for what they are; the central purpose of the canvas, its atmosphere and its unity, are John's alone, and the effect presented by originality is only shared in part with that lent by tradition.

The excellence of this picture must not be allowed to overshadow the due appreciation



VISCOUNT D'ABERNON

when he took to realistic work. We may even trace through "the life" and back to the requirements of the beau ideal something of that natural dignity which invests his figures. For the beau ideal, not as an empty canon of æsthetic pedagogics, but as the symbol of a genuine impulse for the noble and heroic expressing itself through form, would inevitably be sympathetic to much in his own outlook and join with his appreciation of the epic and legendary in literature, and the traditional in art.

These inclinations began to reveal themselves more openly in his literal renderings of appearances. He started to make his selection from them, to guide his pictorial economy in a particular direction, gradually evolving a manner which was the union of the reality of the scene before him with his imaginative invention.

The landscape setting is greatly simplified, its effects of colour less concentrated, but shining with even diffusion, and its salient features more generalized. There is a similar loosening of particularity in the figures, the individual giving way to the type, and decoration claiming a larger share in the representa-

tion. The contemporary subject is retained in this reaching towards a poetic creation of form, there is no easy escape to the mythological and the archaic, but a tranced enchantment keeps it remoter and more emotionally expressive. The figures are busied no longer in vivacious action, or alert in the tense expectancy of drama. Their gestures take on a slower time, and they themselves a kind of permanence, as though each stands for the totality of his kind. Structurally, their occupation of space is enlarged in a two-dimensional degree, with less emphasis on volume. This gives the picture a faintly Byzantine suggestion, which is aided by the increased angularity of motion, sharpened in curves and folds of drapery.

This development in manner tends less to the focusing of design upon a contained central point than to continuity. The underlying rhythm, indicated without insistence, is freer than hitherto, besides being less intricate, as though it were the section of a wider pattern stretching out beyond the limits of the picture. It is a method obviously adapted to purposes of decoration and the demands of the fresco, and the lack of opportunities afforded John

for carrying out his pictorial invention on a scale which is worthy of it must always be a matter for regret.

His capabilities in this direction are well displayed in the mural decoration "Galway," now in the Tate Gallery, which was originally executed for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition at Burlington House in 1916. It is a synthesis of life in the west of Ireland. The episodes displayed are a part of the everyday existence of the people—here, a group of women gossiping on the shore of a mountainous bay; there, men drinking at a refreshment stall, with warehouses and the water of the harbour for a background. They are the common passing events of reality, but their aspect in time is lasting as John shows them. And the figures, for all their mundane verisimilitude, convey, with their large primitive gestures, the sense of a more spacious being, as though John had transferred them, by the imprint of his own formal style, into a Golden Age in which industrialism blends with an earlier state of innocence.

VII

During the war John was attached to the Canadian Expeditionary Force, with the rank of major, as its official painter. He executed many portraits of officers and private soldiers, his acute perception of character unawed by regimental rank. A large number of them served as studies for his cartoon for a Canadian war memorial. It is a huge work, containing over eighty figures, of which the setting is a shelled village just behind the lines, and is realistic in its panoramic sweep of incident. One party of men is returning to the trenches, while others are enjoying their period of rest, fraternizing with the peasantry in an interlude of wine, flowers, and laughter. Some lean, wounded, against the shattered houses, and an airship throbs above. The phases of suspense, destruction, and short respite are shown with undisguised actuality. In its subdued tones it is a *tour de force* of pictorial organization, its figures individually characterized, yet subordinate to the general ruling of action and design. Observation and invention clearly set in play by a quick sympathy, without stress

time becomes not an accumulation but an effacement, from which only the artists rescue permanence. There is a finality in its seeming accident which delightfully denies the premeditation of pose and arrangement, yet which cannot have been achieved except by an intensity of the effort it conceals. The lift of the head, the position of the arms, and the settling of the dress, are all problems brimming with difficulty and superbly overcome.

In 1921 John was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy, only a short time elapsing before he became a full Academician. They were distinctions which he had not sought and which he has borne lightly. His work since then has not become stereotyped, and he still refuses to engage upon portraits unless he is really interested in the sitters. After a visit to Berlin, where he executed the vivid "Herr Stresemann," he proceeded to the island of Ischia, where he achieved equal success with portraits of the native fisher-folk.

But while he was finding considerable impulse to portraiture, he paused to paint the "Symphonie Espagnole," the most completely imaginative and romantic of his larger canvases. In the formal convention of its figures

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on either glory or horror, John displays the vicissitudes of the soldier's fortune. It is a candid statement, though of a sustained eloquence, of visual fact.

Before the end of the war John also painted Mr. Lloyd George, showing an independence of psychological analysis which he continued in the portraits of various members of the Peace Conference. Among them were Lord Fisher, Sir Robert Cecil, Colonel E. T. Lawrence, the Emir Feisal, Lord Sumner, and the premiers of Australia and Canada, to whom, some years later, was added Herr Stresemann. Many of these portraits were shown in his exhibition at the Alpine Club Gallery in 1920.

An outstanding work of the post-war period is the full-length "Madame Suggia," in the Tate Gallery. Though it has none of the deliberate references to tradition which characterize "The Smiling Woman," it is conceived and carried out with the same fine conscientiousness. But the traces of the labour are not seen in the result, which gives rather the impression of brilliant improvisation. It is the fixing of an arrested instant, alive with that sense of the present in regard to which

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it has definite affinities with El Greco. It shows a dance, to pipe and guitar, of a whirling throng of men and girls who have transferred the frenzy of a bacchanal to Spain. A rapt musician, resembling Don Quixote, dominates the assembly and stirs it with his piping to a delirium of speed against a background of cloud, ruin, and rock. The whole picture weaves an intricate arabesque of pattern, and though the colours, in which grey predominates, have a sombre luminosity, it quivers with excitement and speed.

John cannot rest at a static accomplishment; his work covers a wide range of subject, and the means at his disposal seem inexhaustible. They are all related, stamped unmistakably with their origin, yet continually branch to new ways. His exhibition at Messrs. Tooth's, in 1929, revealed a fresh handling of landscape, and introduced him as a flower painter.

He knows France well, and has a deep acquaintance with French literature. This is but to be expected of one who, in Paris, has frequently sat at a café with Jean Moréas and listened till the dawn to the recitation of those "Stances" which brought about a renaissance

in French poetry. He early discovered, too, the "Mireille" of Frédéric Mistral, the great rustic epic of Provence, that drew him to the southern country for which he has ever since had a predilection. There, an hour's journey to the west of Marseilles, lies the town of Martigues, to which he has returned more than once, and in whose neighbourhood he painted the landscape of 1929.

It should more correctly be styled the Republic of the Martigues, which are three adjacent parishes of fisher-folk, bordering the inland sea of Provence, the Étang de Berre. For the inaccurate and ready purpose of advertisement, the posters of the P. L. M. Railway have renamed it the Venice of Provence. Luckily it leads nowhere but to the stony desert of the Camargue and a chain of desolate lagoons. Here and there a broken arch traces an obliterated Roman marching road, but the phantom legionaries are undisturbed by modern traffic, which swerves east to the Riviera. Martigues is left, isolated in its barren pride of certain rights of fishery, dating from the beginnings of French history, indifferent to the summer invasion of mosquitoes and the winter one of artists.

man's catalogue. It is every whit as hard to paint an object intrinsically beautiful as to evoke beauty where it is superficially difficult to discover it. John's flower painting is entirely realistic, and executed with great feeling for plastic design; the radiant colour meets Nature herself, and is content with that. There is no attempt at arrangement, yet the pattern is clear and impeccable. The exquisite painting of a vase, a tapestry background, or a vivid yellow packet of cigarettes thrown down at the side, gathers the riot of leaf and petal into pictorial cohesion.

In his recent portraits there is sufficient intimation that John will not be imprisoned by a manner in this most mannered branch of art; he declines to paint all his sitters in the same way, though each still becomes definitely "a John." But one may say that the characterization is less accentuated and dramatic, less dependent on the emphasis of salencies both psychological and physical. On the other hand, it gives the impression of being a more meditative reading, summed up from a greater number of aspects and more evenly distributed over the whole presentation. Some, like the "W. B. Yeats," are suffused with a sparkling

clarity, rather silvery in tone, as though John, after all his use of it, were embarking on fresh discoveries in the nature of colour. It exists in a less degree in the rich bravery of the "Viscount d'Abernon" and the more subdued "Mr. Montagu Norman." These might be related to the work of the later Venetians, but it would be unwise to infer a special tendency from them, for the portrait of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, with its solidity, its lustrous blacks, and the careful detail of the head, has kinship with the graver Franz Hals.

One discusses John in terms of the great masters, and on terms of equality with them. His progress is still unarrested, in spite of the great range over which it has been exercised. It has touched life at innumerable points, always with independence and certainty. Classic, romantic, and realist, he testifies in all his work to the glory of form and colour, and expresses it with abundance and joy.